"A mark indelible": Herman Melville and the cross-cultural history of tattooing in the nineteenth century

Frank, Michael C

Abstract: This chapter investigates the figure of the facially tattooed white sailor in colonial literature from the time of the Spanish conquista to the nineteenth century, arguing that facial tattoos were regarded as breaking a taboo: a conspicious sign of alienation from Western society and its norms, they clearly identified those who bore them as "cultural defectors" who were literally marked by non-Western cultures. The taboo of facial tattooing can be traced to the very beginnings of modern colonialism. Early accounts of the conquest of Mexico relate the exceptional case of Gonzalo Guerrero, a shipwrecked sailor who became the military commander of a Mayan chief in Yucatán. When Cortés reached the region and ordered the Spaniard to join his troops, Guerrero refused, reportedly explaining that his countrymen would not tolerate his "carved" – that is, tattooed – face. After the discovery of Polynesian all-over tattooing in the context of the Pacific encounter, the figure of the facially tattooed Westerner became more prominent. Although the practice of tattooing spread among sailors in the nineteenth century, it was usually confined to the arms, so that the taboo of facial tattooing remained in place. Facially tattooed sailors who returned home – such as the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Cabri – were reduced to the status of freaks, which is why Herman Melville's "Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life" (1846) presents facial tattooing as the ultimate threat to one's social identity: in this fictional text, having one's face tattooed is equivalent to losing one's face. Thus, the Marquesan practice of all-over tattooing indicates the limits of the process of cross-cultural exchange that has otherwise characterized the history of tattooing since Cook's first voyage of discovery.

Originally published at:
Frank, Michael C (2011). "A mark indelible": Herman Melville and the cross-cultural history of tattooing in the nineteenth century. In: Jobs, Sebastian; Mackenthun, Gesa. Embodiments of cultural encounters. Münster: Waxmann Verlag GmbH, 41-59.

Sebastian Jobs
Gesa Mackenthun (eds.)

Embodiments of Cultural Encounters

Waxmann 2011
Münster / New York / München / Berlin

CHAPTER TWO

"A Mark Indelible": Herman Melville and the Cross-Cultural History of Tattooing in the Nineteenth Century

MICHAEL C. FRANK

1

In 1511, a Spanish caravel was shipwrecked on the voyage from Panama to the island of Santo Domingo. Of the twenty men and women who escaped in a rowboat, only half reached the coast of Yucatán alive. Captured by a cacique (native, in this case Mayan, chief), some were immediately sacrificed to the gods, or so the available sources claim, while a handful managed to flee. They became slaves to another Mayan chief, and only two survived. One, Jerónimo de Aguilar, was a Franciscan friar who would subsequently serve as an interpreter to Cortés. The other, Gonzalo Guerrero, was a sailor. His career is no less exceptional, as Diego de Landa, the later bishop of the district, reports in his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*:

> Guerrero learned the language and went to Checternal (Chetumal), which is Salamanca de Yucatan. Here he was received by a chief named Nachan Can, who placed in his charge his military affairs; in these he did well and conquered his master's enemies many times. He taught the Indians to fight, showing them how to make barricades and bastions. In this way, and living as an Indian, he gained a great reputation and married a woman of high quality, by whom he had children, and he made no attempt to escape with Aguilar. He decorated his body, let his hair grow, pierced his ears to wear rings like the Indians, and is believed to have become an idolater like them. (de Landa 4)

When Cortés reached Yucatán in 1519 and was informed about the presence of "bearded men" in the region (6), he promptly summoned the Spaniards to join his expedition. The native messengers who conveyed his letter were given beads to enable the captives to buy their freedom. But only Aguilar followed Cortés's order. According to Bernal Díaz's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, he arrived in a canoe, brown-skinned and naked save for a loincloth, san-

dals, and what remained of his coat, but carrying a book of hours which clearly identified him as a Christian (see Díaz 93). As he told Cortés, Guerrero was reluctant to return to his countrymen and could not be convinced to join the Spanish troops. The reasons for this reluctance appear to have been twofold. On the one hand, Guerrero felt strong ties to the native community, in which he enjoyed a respectable social status. On the other hand, the Indians had applied their practices of body modification to his face. According to Bernal Díaz, Aguilar had personally spoken to Guerrero, whose words are rendered in direct speech:

> Brother Aguilar, I am married and have three children and the Indians look on me as a Cacique and captain in wartime – You go, and God be with you, but I have my face tattooed and my ears pierced, what would the Spaniards say should they see me in that guise? and look how handsome these boys of mine are [...]. (Díaz 90) [1]

When Aguilar first introduced himself to Cortés's men, he had "his hair shorn like an Indian slave"; Díaz notes, moreover, that he "squatted down on his haunches as the Indians do" (93). Neither the movements nor the appearance of Aguilar's body were permanently altered, however. By contrast, Guerrero's facial tattoos were irreversible. Signaling his membership in the Mayan community, they would have made a full reintegration into the society of his compatriots difficult, if not impossible. For in the eyes of the conquistadors, what was once a mark of cultural assimilation would have turned into a mark of cultural alienation, belonging to one who – unlike Aguilar, "the good Christian" (de Landa 4) – had given up the beliefs and practices of his own superior culture, nation, and creed. This, at least, is what Guerrero appears to have feared, or what he believed was a convincing explanation for his decision, one that Aguilar was likely to accept (if Guerrero's speech was not made up by Bernal Díaz, as has recently been suggested).[2] What is certain, in any case, is that the received version of Guerrero's story emphasizes the fact that his body was permanently modified; it states that the sailor-turned-warrior had had his face "carved" (the word "tattooed" in the English translation being an anachronism, of course, since that term was not known in Europe until Cook's first visit to Tahiti in 1769). This is to say that Guerrero bore either facial scarification or what would later become known as tattoos.

Even if it is partly the product of early colonial discourse, Guerrero's now legendary tattooed body is – quite literally – an "embodiment of cultural contact." The person identified as "Guerrero" in Díaz's account is physically marked by a non-European society, bearing the stigma of the cultural renegade. His story constitutes an early instance of what the German anthropologist Karl-Heinz Kohl has

1 The original Spanish text reads: "que yo tengo labrada la cara y horadadas las orejas" (quoted from Romero 352).

2 See the revisionist reading of the available sources in Romero 352-53. On the shifting interpretations and uses of the Guerrero story in colonial and postcolonial discourse, see also Mueller.

rightly described as an "arcane tradition" (8; my translation) within the vast corpus devoted to European overseas expansion. This tradition documents the long-overlooked phenomenon of "cultural defection," first identified as such by the Swiss historian Urs Bitterli in his *Geistes- und Kulturgeschichte der europäisch-überseeischen Begegnung* (86-87). Anticipating the now common understanding of colonial space as a field of cross-cultural interactions – often one-sidedly associated with the name of Mary Louise Pratt and the concept of the "contact zone" – Bitterli's 1976 study called for a reorientation of colonial history as a history of cultural encounters. Bitterli lays out a typology of four different kinds of encounter, distinguished primarily by the criteria of length and intensity, concluding that despite all differences between individual colonial powers, colonies, and historical epochs, one of the constants of European colonialism was the "dominance of the European cultural engagement" (Bitterli 173-74; my trans.). More recently, historian Jürgen Osterhammel has identified this dominance as one of the defining characteristics of modern colonialism. European expansion, Osterhammel writes, was characterized by a general "unwillingness" to acculturate (16): whereas "[e]xtensive acculturation to the values and customs of Europe was expected of the colonized [...], there was no significant counter-acculturation in which the colonizers borrowed on a large scale from the dominated civilizations" (15-16).

As Bitterli acknowledges, however, colonialism was not a unidirectional process of "Europeanizing" the natives. From the earliest contacts with the Americas, it was accompanied by a persistent countercurrent of Europeans "going native," even if this dimension of the colonial encounter has been effectively marginalized and suppressed in imperialist versions of history. The examples discussed by Bitterli and Kohl indicate that in every century and on every continent, there have been registered cases of "cultural defection," or as the authors also call it, "escape from civilization" – sailors or settlers leaving the society of their compatriots in order to live in indigenous communities and according to local customs. Traces of this tradition can be found in literary texts, both fictional and nonfictional – most notably, travel accounts, but also works of other descriptive genres, including private letters, for example, as well as short stories and novels. My own study, *Kulturelle Einflussangst*, maintains that the attitude toward non-European cultures that emerged from such writings suggests an "anxiety of cultural influence" rather than a simple reluctance to acculturate. This anxiety involves both attraction and repulsion and is thus more ambivalent than Osterhammel's term "unwillingness" seems to imply. What I have termed the "taboos" of acculturation and miscegenation become most obvious not in the representation of the culturally and racially other, but in the depiction of individuals who have transgressed the imaginative boundary separating "us" – Christians, Europeans, white men – from that other.

In the following essay, I would like to continue this investigation by focusing more specifically on the role of the body in representations of cultural defectors. Such a perspective implies two premises. The first, more general premise, is that the colonial experience was "intensely physical," as E. M. Collingham has

persuasively argued (1). In her study *Imperial Bodies*, Collingham demonstrates that in British India, the health and integrity of the body was at the center of governmental concerns regarding the consumption of indigenous food, physical contact with natives, interethnic sexual relations, as well as – first and foremost – the detrimental influences of the local climate. The case of Anglo-Indian contact is highly specific, of course, but Collingham's findings are nevertheless more broadly relevant. They remind us that the colonial encounter was a physical as well as an epistemological challenge and that we should therefore attempt to do justice to both of these aspects.

Nineteenth-century representations of the Pacific encounter are an interesting case in point. They highlight the physical dimension of the encounter, usually contrasting the extreme hardships of the sea journey with the sensual, not to mention sexual pleasures afforded by the South Sea Islands. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European and American authors reiterated Bougainville's paradoxical identification of Tahiti as both a New Eden (and hence a place of prelapsarian innocence) and a New Cythera (referring to the birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty, love, and sexual rapture). In their emphasis on the attractions of island life, accounts of European- and American-Polynesian contact gave unprecedented prominence to the figure of the cultural renegade. By the close of the eighteenth century, the phenomenon of cultural defection had become so common in the Pacific region that it could no longer be ignored. And many of these defectors underwent the indigenous practice of tattooing. Almost three hundred years after the conquest of Mexico – and the apparently isolated instance of a tattooed Spaniard – the literature on the South Seas thus reintroduced the motif of the white sailor whose body had been modified in indigenous fashion. In this context, the body was conceived less as a site of physical *experience* (as Collingham phrases it) than as a site of physical *inscription*.

This, then, is the second premise of my study: in nineteenth-century texts, tattoos were frequently interpreted as corporal markings of an alien culture – and hence as bodily manifestations of cultural contact. As the following outline of the cross-cultural history of tattooing in the nineteenth century will demonstrate, Herman Melville was not alone in considering tattoos, and especially facial tattoos, as "marks of transgression" (White). Due to its self-reflexive engagement with the issue, however, Melville's 1846 book *Typee* is particularly well-suited for my topic.

2

As countless examples illustrate, literary depictions of the colonial encounter lay great emphasis on the arrival scene. In its dramatization of the moment of first contact, this scene usually opposes two clearly distinct, geographically and culturally defined collectives. In some cases, a third element is introduced that can-

not be allocated to either of the two groups. Just as Cortés and his men were puzzled at the unexpected sight of an Indian speaking Spanish and carrying a book of hours, later conquerors, explorers, sailors, and colonists related structurally similar stories. One example may be found in the Polynesian arrival scene of Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff's *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World*, where the author – a German naturalist who accompanied the Russian scientific expedition under Captain Adam Krusenstern – describes the ships' arrival in the Marquesas. In the bay of Nuku Hiva, the largest island of the group, the Russians are greeted by what first looks like "a South Sea islander," but soon turns out to be a European, "entirely in the costume of the country, with only a piece of cloth round the waist" (von Langsdorff, vol. 1, 90). The corresponding passage in the English translation of Langsdorff's travelogue, which appeared one year after the original, in 1813, reads as follows:

> An English sailor of the name of Roberts, who had, God knows how, or on what occasion, come hither, now stood before us, and informed us that he had inhabited the island some years. Such had been the influence of the climate upon his exterior, that he was scarcely to be distinguished by his colour from the natives. Several testimonials, which he had from captains of ships who had touched here, of the services he had rendered them, gave us naturally great confidence in him, and we rejoiced not a little at having so unexpectedly found an European, from whom we should receive, according to his own promises, all the information we could desire relating to the island [...]. (90)

As we know today, the English sailor "Roberts" was really called Edward Robarts. Aged 27, Robarts had deserted from a whaler in 1797.[3] Langsdorff says that he and the other members of the expedition were much "surprised" at the sight of a white man in such an unusual context and in such unwonted guise. Yet the history of Edward Robarts is by no means singular. Ever since the first contact with the South Pacific in the sixteenth century there had been cases of seamen becoming separated from the rest of their crews and subsequently living among the natives of the islands, either involuntarily (after a shipwreck) or voluntarily (as mutineers or deserters). After the advent of commercial shipping, the desertion from whalers, sealers, and trading ships became such a common phenomenon that a special word was coined to denote it: "beachcombing." As the anthropologist H. E. Maude has shown in his pioneering study on the subject, the establishment of a British settlement at Port Jackson in 1788 was an important prerequisite for the "beachcombing boom" of the nineteenth century (137-38). The South Sea Islands, which had only rarely been visited by explorers during the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, were now regularly

3 After six years on the Marquesas, Robarts had married a chieftain's daughter with whom he left Nuku Hiva in 1806. In Calcutta, he later wrote an account of his island adventures in the form of a journal, the manuscript of which has survived in the National Library of Scotland. See Dening, "Introduction."

frequented by European and American ships. Maude estimates that 75 per cent of the beachcombers were seamen, predominantly British but with an increasing number of Americans, whereas the second largest group (about 20 per cent) consisted of escaped convicts (160).

Although there are important differences between the individual histories of beachcombers, only few of which have been recorded, one can make several generalizations. The most important one concerns the exceptional relationship between the beachcombers and the local societies. "What really differentiated beachcombers from other immigrants," Maude observes, "was the fact that they were essentially integrated into, and dependent for their livelihood on, the indigenous communities" (135). The island societies, Maude continues to explain, were generally highly receptive to immigrants, and beachcombers could be reasonably assured of their welcome, even though there were occasional exceptions to this rule – due either to a (well-grounded) fear of infectious disease or to the often aggressive behavior of the crews visiting the islands. The island world of Polynesia and Melanesia had already had a long history of immigration when the first European ships arrived there, so that in the heyday of beachcombing, the local communities could adapt previously existing customs – the integration of immigrants by formal adoption or marriage, for example – to a new historical situation (see Maude 149). The typical beachcomber was part of the indigenous community, in most of whose cultural and social practices he participated. Like the Englishman Edward Robarts, he dressed in native style and was tattooed, apparently under strong pressure from his hosts. At the same time, there were strict limitations to his inclusion, concerning, for instance, the application of the complex system of taboos. Hence, the beachcomber occupied a "peculiar position [...], in yet out of the indigenous society" (Maude 163), which made him an ideal mediator. As we saw, it is precisely this point that Langsdorff emphasizes in his first description of Robarts.

From Robarts, Krusenstern learned that there was a second European resident on Nuku Hiva: Jean-Baptiste Cabri from Bordeaux. Like Robarts, Cabri had already spent several years on the Marquesas. While Robarts's interest in the local culture seemed very limited – as Langsdorff emphasizes, he "lived much more separate from the islanders," and had only a restricted knowledge of their language, manners, and customs (von Langsdorff, vol. 1: 98) – Cabri had almost forgotten his native tongue when he first spoke with the Russians. In Langsdorff's words, he "had so much lost the manners and habits of civilized life, that little difference was to be discerned between him and the natives, with regard to his habits and mode of living" (98). He swam as well as the natives, had married the daughter of a lower chief, and was on friendly terms with the other islanders. Moreover, he showed an unmistakable sign of his assimilation to Marquesan culture: "His whole figure, not excepting his face was tattooed" (98; see Fig. 1, left). In 1817, Cabri's own account of his nine-year stay on the Marquesas appeared in Geneva (under the name of Joseph Kabris). Like Langsdorff's travelogue, it has

Fig. 1: Left: "Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Cabri, a Frenchman, found on the Island of Nukahiwa, and there become half savage´." Source: von Langsdorff, vol. 1, figure opposite 97. Right: "Kabris, Vice-roi et Grand Juge." Source: von den Steinen 42.

become an important source for studies of the social significance of traditional Marquesan tattooing, which was seriously impeded and, indeed, almost obliterated by the double impact of disease (the radical decimation of the native populations due to exposure to European illnesses) and colonization (missionaries' and colonial administrators' deliberate attempts to eradicate the practice). When the German anthropologist Karl von den Steinen arrived at Nuku Hiva in 1897 to conduct field work for his monumental study *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst*, he realized that he had come "[h]alf a century too late!" (n. pag.; my trans.). To this day, anthropological studies have to rely on literature about and by beachcombers for their accounts of the cultural semantics of traditional Marquesan tattooing. Cabri's text, though full of obvious exaggerations, is of particular value in this respect. In it Cabri states that he received the first tattoos from his father-in-law. A "quarter mask" showed his status as the son-in-law of the chief and a second tattoo, in the shape of the sun on his right eyelids, indicated his newly acquired position as a "judge" (Kabris 150; my trans.). In the following three days, Cabri was tattooed by another islander on his chest, arms, and legs. During a subsequent military raid to the island of Tahuata, Cabri boasts, he managed to

steal a canoe from the enemy, including the ten men who were sitting in it, and he was consequently made "viceroy" and commander, receiving another tattoo on his right chest as a sign of honor (Kabris 150; my trans.).

What Langsdorff describes as Cabri's "black, or rather blue eye" (vol. 1: 122) appears to have had a less honorable meaning, however. In his 1993 study *Tattooing in Polynesia*, anthropologist Alfred Gell points out that the chiefs of the Marquesas Islands did not derive their privileged social status from religious authority; nor were they sufficiently legitimated through their genealogy (as sons of former chiefs). Instead, their position depended to a great extent on military success as well as on their ability to feed supporters in times of drought-induced famine (see Gell, 165-70). In "feasting societies," the chiefs shared their food storage with their followers, who received a specific facial tattoo indicating both their membership in this elite circle as well as their commitment to the chief. From this fact, Gell infers "that the tattooing of the supporters [...] was a kind of honourable degradation: signalizing both the access to power and wealth, but also the fact that this access was gained via dependency" (207). This thesis is corroborated by Langsdorff's travelogue, in which Cabri is said to have received his eye-tattoo "upon one of these occasions," and for the very same reason, even the Englishman Edward Robarts could not have avoided being tattooed:

> Roberts, who had only a puncture on his breast, in the form of a long square, [...] assured us that he would never have submitted to the operation, if he had not been constrained by the scarcity in the preceding year to become one of the guests fed by the chief Katanuah. (von Langsdorff, vol. 1: 122)

At the end of the twelve-day sojourn of the Russian expedition on the island of Nuku Hiva, the tattooed Frenchman Cabri was (involuntarily) carried away from the Marquesas after having lingered on board one of the two ships. He was brought to Kamchatka in Russia, where "the novel appearance of his tattooed body attracted the attention of every one," as Langsdorff notes in the explanation to the figure shown here (xiv; see Fig. 1, left). In Moscow and St. Petersburg, Cabri displayed his tattoos, performed native dances on stage, and played "cannibal charades" (see Dening, "Introduction" 8-9), until he was offered a post as a teacher of swimming to the corps of marine cadets at Cronstadt (see von Langsdorff, vol. 1: xiv). Having been presented to Louis XVIII and the King of Prussia, he returned to France, where he ended his days in the fairs of Paris and Brittany. The second extant portrait of Cabri, from his time in the *variété*, is entitled "Joseph Kabris, native of Bordeaux, viceroy and great judge of the Islands of Mendoça" (von den Steinen 43; my trans.). It shows Cabri in extravagant disguise, with a kiltlike skirt and ostrich feathers (see Fig. 1, right), the first of many tattooed "freaks" displayed in European and American fairs and circuses until well into the twentieth century. Interestingly, a comparison of this later portrait with the one included in Langsdorff's 1812 travel account reveals that after

his return to Europe, Cabri had not only acquired various exotic props, but additional tattoos as well. When Cabri died in Valenciennes in 1822, a local museum thought about preserving his hide in the interest of scientists and other curious visitors (see Dening, "Introduction" 9).

One is reminded here of the words attributed to Gonzalo Guerrero, the Spanish-born Mayan warrior of the early sixteenth century. For Cabri, the cultural defector wearing a facial tattoo, the reintegration into his own native society ultimately proved more difficult than his previous integration into the Marquesan community, in which he had spent nine years as a beachcomber; as Greg Dening succinctly puts it, "the return was more costly than the venture" (*Islands* 149). In early nineteenth-century Europe, Cabri's extensive tattoos clearly identified him as a cultural renegade who had temporarily abandoned European civilization and who had literally been marked by a faraway "savage" culture. Although his bodily marks made him a living fetish that could be scrutinized, touched, desired, and wondered at, they also stigmatized him as a social outcast who belonged to neither "us" nor "them."

3

The greatest difference between the cases of Guerrero and Cabri is that in the early nineteenth century, Europeans were already aware of non-European forms of body modification and that they even had a specific word to denote them. Pre-Cook accounts of Polynesian tattooing still lacked a precise term to describe the practice, usually choosing the misleading verb "to paint," as de Bougainville's 1771 *Voyage autour du monde* illustrates. Although the French explorer was the first to emphasize that the Tahitian body ornaments left "indelible traces," he still described them in terms of a transient "fashion," drawing a comparison to the rouge worn by Parisian ladies (254; my trans.). As is well known, it was via the accounts of Captain Cook's 1769 visit to Tahiti that the word "tattoo" entered the English lexicon (then still spelled "tattow," which is closer to the Tahitian *tatau*), from where it migrated into other European languages. Apart from the *word*, Cook and his crews also introduced samples of the *practice* thus described: by getting their arms "marked" in Tahitian style, members of Cook's first expedition inaugurated the tradition of the tattooed sailor (quoted by J. C. Beaglehole in Cook 125). In the decades following Cook's first voyage, the practice of tattooing spread so rapidly among seamen that tattoos soon became a defining characteristic of "the" sailor. In the process, the Tahitian *tatau* was adapted rather than adopted, the original Polynesian motifs being almost entirely replaced by national and religious symbols with a long tradition in European iconography. Joseph Oettermann illustrates this point by citing a letter from the duchess Anna Amalie of Weimar to the German poet and writer Christoph Martin Wieland. The letter, which is dated Portici, 20 June 1789, indicates how early the tat-

toos worn by European sailors began to deviate from Polynesian patterns. "Only yesterday," the duchess tells Wieland, "I saw a sailor at Chevalier Hamilton's at the Barca, whose arms and legs were tattooed in Otahitian fashion, and as we inspected the figures, they turned out to be the crucifixion of Christ, the English coat of arms, the Holy Sacrament – il capo di Policinello" (quoted in Oettermann 45; my trans.). This example shows that despite the use of well-known symbols and motifs, some of which were already familiar from tattooed pilgrims to Jerusalem, as we shall see further on, the practice of tattooing remained inextricably linked with Tahiti.

In accordance with this traditional view of tattooing history, some scholars still maintain that "[t]attooing, as it is now practiced in western countries, originated as a consequence of European expansion into the Pacific, as is witnessed by the Polynesian origin of the word 'tattoo'" (Gell 10). Joseph Oettermann was the first to use a more cautious formulation. As he phrased it, the Tahitian encounter provided an "impulse of revival" (21; my trans.) that led to a combination of Western tattooing traditions with the newly discovered Polynesian practice. More recently, this view has been taken up and developed by both historians and anthropologists. In her introduction to a collected volume on the extended, if discontinuous history of tattooing in Western culture, Jane Caplan asserts that "the Pacific encounter is not originary" ("Introduction" xvi). Archeological evidence of the practice dates back to the late fourth millennium BC, but the contributors to Caplan's book are more interested in those historical instances of tattooing that are documented in written sources. Caplan's *Written on the Body* addresses several isolated uses of tattooing in the Occident. The most important of these uses are, first, the "stigmatizing" of slaves or criminals among Greeks, Romans, and Celts, and second, the full-body tattooing of the ancient inhabitants of Britain described by several classical authors, including Julius Caesar. In the seventh century, St. Isidore of Seville reported that "[t]he Scots derive their name in their own language from their painted bodies [*scissi* = "cut"], because these are marked with various designs by being pricked with iron needles with ink on them [...] and the Picts [i.e., the inhabitants of Northern Britain] also are thus named because of the absurd marks produced on their bodies by craftsmen with tiny pinpricks and juice extracted from their local grasses" (quoted in Gilbert 16).

Historically closer to the Pacific encounter was a third use of tattooing in Europe: the acquisition of commemorative tattoos among pilgrims to Palestine as well as to the shrine of Loreto in Italy. The picture shown in Figure 2 documents the tattoos of Ratge Stubbe from Hamburg, Germany, which were subsequently described by the pastor Johann Lund in his book *Die alten jüdischen Heiligthümer, Gottesdienste und Gewohnheiten* (1738; see Landfester 89-90). Stubbe received these tattoos while in Jerusalem in 1669, and they thus pre-date Cook's first visit to Tahiti by exactly one hundred years. A comparison of this image with descriptions of sailors' tattoos from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seems to confirm Caplan's thesis that the adaptation of Polynesian tat-

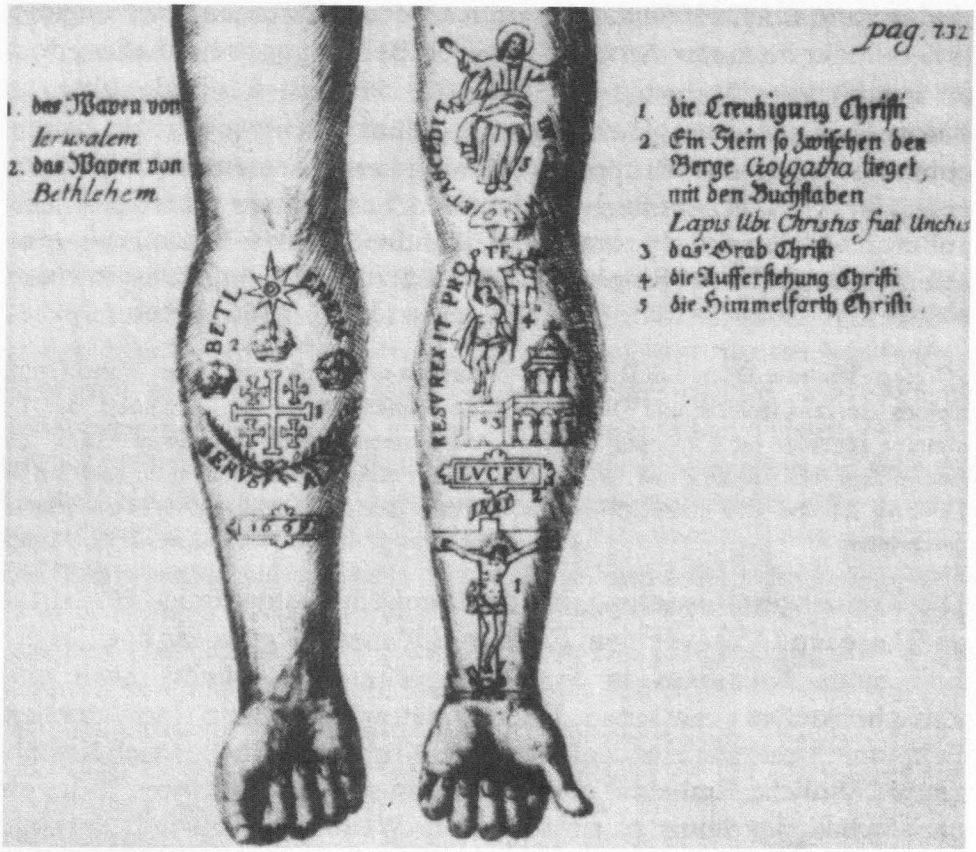

Fig. 2: Tattoos of Christian symbols and Biblical scenes, acquired by German pilgrim Ratge Stubbe in Jerusalem in 1669. Source: Oettermann 16.

tooing according to already existing Occidental practices has to be seen as "a process of convergence and reinforcement" ("Introduction" xx). In the latest publication dedicated to the topic – the volume *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West* – the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas consequently shifts the focus from the question of historical origin to that of "trans-cultural" exchange (11). What needs closer examination, according to Thomas, is "the role of cross-cultural interactions in shaping or influencing European body arts" (10).

In its focus on the various contact zones through which tattooing practices were shared, transformed, and disseminated, Thomas's anthology is of great interest for the present study. Like its predecessors, however, it fails to mention one important aspect: the absence of *facial* tattooing – as it was common in Polynesia, and especially on the Marquesas – outside of circuses and fairs in the West. In 1876, Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso observed that the practice of tattooing occurred "only among the lower classes – peasants, sailors, workers, shepherds, soldiers, and even more frequently among criminals" (*Criminal Man* 58); indeed, Lombroso continued, tattooing had become so common among criminals that it could be considered a sure indicator of delinquency. Strikingly,

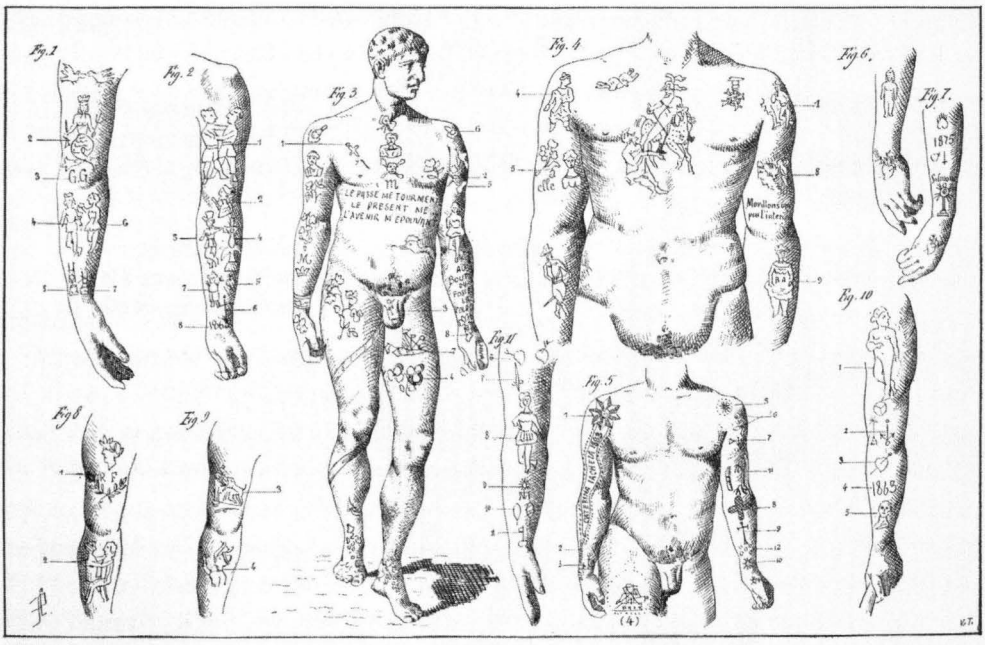

Fig. 3: "Tatuaggi di delinquentini." Source: Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente.* Fig. LXVIII.

however, even Lombroso's representations of "criminal men" include not a single facial tattoo (see Fig. 3): the delinquents' tattoos are concentrated on arms, legs, and chest, occasionally extending to the penis. During the Pacific encounter, it would seem, Europeans only adapted the Polynesian practice of tattooing insofar as it was compatible with earlier forms of permanent body marking.

4

The fact that facial tattoos signified the loss of one's former position as an integrated member of European or U.S. American society has nowhere been addressed more explicitly than in Herman Melville's first extended prose work, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. In 1841, the son of an impoverished gentry family enlisted on the whaler *Acushnet*, deserting it on the same Marquesas island that had been inhabited by Robarts and Cabri forty years previously. Due to his great skills as a writer, Melville's travelogue – considered to be authentic by early readers, as contemporary reviews indicate (see Branch 53-89) – has made him by far the most famous beachcomber, although he actually only spent four weeks on Nuku Hiva. In his account, Melville transforms those four weeks into four months and also takes some other liberties. Although the book is now usually classified as "fiction," one may nevertheless speak of "ethnographic realism" with regard to Melville's description of his Marquesan adventures. This realism derives not so much from the fact that Melville based his narrative on personal experi-

ences and observations but that he drew on various authoritative sources, including Langsdorff's travelogue, of which the influence on *Typee* is often overlooked by critics (with the exception of Charles Roberts Anderson, whose 1939 study *Melville in the South Seas* remains invaluable background reading).

Melville is an atypical beachcomber in at least two respects. To start with, the sophisticated and stylistically brilliant writer is "a very uncommon common sailor," as an early English critic remarked in a review published in the *Times* (quoted in Branch 78). This fact is made explicit in the passage in which Melville's semi-fictional alter ego, Tommo, explains his decision to desert his ship in order to escape the physical hardships on board: "To use the concise, point-blank phrase of the sailors, I had made my mind to 'run away'" (Melville, *Typee* 20). By underlining the fact that the language of the common sailors is not his original language, Melville establishes his autobiographical character as a "gentleman-beachcomber" (Herbert 158), distinguished from the ordinary "runaways." By the middle of the nineteenth century, beachcombers were commonly described in rather dark colors by both captains fearing the loss of their crews while anchored on Pacific island shores, and missionaries seeing their civilizing project undermined by white men "going native." Despite such biases, however, the bad reputation of beachcombers – which is confirmed by Melville in his description of a delinquent, drunken Englishman who comes on board the ship when it approaches Nuku Hiva (*Typee* 12-13) – was partly justified.

The second important difference between the well-educated American and other beachcombers is the fact that Melville's Tommo never intends to stay on the island permanently. From the moment he and his fellow deserter, Toby, enter the valley of the Taipi, the two young men appear as tourists looking for adventure rather than cultural renegades about to start careers as "viceroys" of an island tribe. During his four months' stay, Tommo grows "remarkably fond" (*Typee* 73) of the indigenous food, has a native companion who appears to be his mistress, and even agrees "to assume the Typee costume, a little altered, however, to suit my own views of propriety" (121). There are, however, clear limits to his acculturation:

> When at Rome do as the Romans do, I held to be so good a proverb, that being in Typee I made a point of doing as the Typees did. Thus I ate poee-poee as they did; I walked about in a garb striking for its simplicity; and I reposed on a community of couches; besides doing many other things in conformity with their peculiar habits; but the farthest I ever went in the way of conformity, was on several occasions to regale myself with raw fish. (209)

When the Taipi try to take his integration one step further and offer to tattoo his face, Tommo's enjoyment of his leisurely island life turns into deep anxiety. Even before he describes this pivotal incident, Tommo repeatedly expresses his ambivalent attitude toward the Marquesan practice of tattooing. The tattooing style of

the Marquesas Isles was the most elaborate and extensive of Polynesia; only here could one find the phenomenon of all-over tattooing, named *te patu tiki* – "wrapping in images" – by the natives (Gell 163; see also Ottino-Garanger/Ottino-Garanger). Tommo characterizes such tattooing as a "blemish," which, at best, has a "ludicrous" and "grotesque" effect and which, at worst, seems "hideous" (Melville, *Typee* 7-8, 83, 86, 92, 134, 218, 236). It is striking that Tommo only uses such negative terms when speaking of tattooed *men*, or more precisely, men wearing *facial* tattoos. He points out that women were only tattooed on the lips, shoulders, arms, and feet. It would seem that as far as the practice corresponded with familiar forms of (nonpermanent) bodily ornamentation, it could be openly appreciated by Western observers (it should be added, however, that Marquesan women also wore tattoos on their thighs, buttocks, and genitalia, which Melville does not mention). In a passage charged with homoerotic undertones, Tommo describes the warrior Marnoo as a "Polynesian Apollo" because he is one of the rare men who do not have a tattooed face: "His cheek was of a feminine softness, and his face was free from the least blemish of tattooing, although the rest of his body was drawn all over with fanciful figures" (136).

The theme of facial tattooing is actually introduced before Melville's narrator-protagonist "jumps ship." Addressing the crew, the captain admonishes his sailors not to use their shore leave to desert, describing the destiny of other "runaways":

> There was the old Dido, she put in here about two years ago, and sent one watch off on liberty; they never were heard of again for a week – the natives swore they didn't know where they were – and only three of them ever got back to the ship again, and one with his face damaged for life, for the cursed heathens tattooed a broad patch clean across his figure-head. (34)

Only after he has thus described the risk of having one's "face damaged for life" does the captain mention that deserters may also fall prey to the native practice of cannibalism. What this implies is that the dangers associated with tattooing were considered an even more effective deterrent to desertion than the usual horror image of man-eating savages. Even though these warnings fail to daunt Melville's hero, who escapes to the interior of the island, Tommo seems to remember his captain's words when he is confronted with the Taipi's desire to tattoo his face. He is "[h]orrified at the bare thought of being rendered hideous for life" (218). Because he suspects "that in some luckless hour I should be disfigured in such a manner as never more to have the *face* to return to my countrymen" (219), Tommo cannot enjoy his stay among the "noble savages" of the island any longer. His residence thus assumes the character of involuntary detention, in accordance with a long tradition of captivity narratives in American colonial literature.

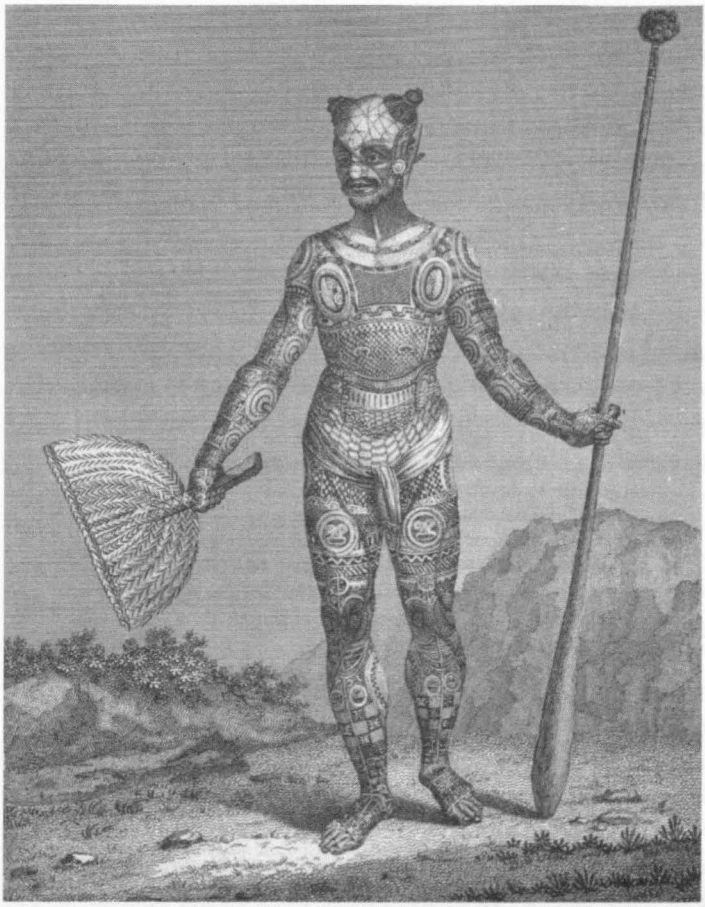

Fig. 4: "An inhabitant of the island of Nukahiwa." Source: von Langsdorff, vol. 1, figure opposite 117.

The novel's association between facial tattooing and the idea of captivity is also evidenced in the earlier portrait of the hero's "savage valet" Kory-Kory, whose face is marked by "three broad longitudinal stripes of tattooing, which [...] completely spanned his physiognomy; one extending in a line with his eyes, another crossing the face in the vicinity of the nose, and the third sweeping along his lips from ear to ear" (83). A comparison of this description with the visual representations provided by Langsdorff's travelogue shows that Melville's narrator does not exaggerate the quantity and quality of facial tattoos among certain Marquesan men: in Figure 4, the circular lines running across the face are clearly discernible. Yet the comparison Melville draws in the following observation is nevertheless idiosyncratic: "His countenance thus triply hooped, as it were, with tattooing, always reminded me of those unhappy wretches whom I have sometimes observed gazing out sentimentally from behind the grated bars of a prison window" (83). It has been suggested that Tommo's connection of the tattooed lines in Kory-Kory's face with a barred prison window indicates his own perceived cap-

tivity (see Samson 41; Edmond 93): in his eyes, a facial tattoo represents a form of confinement from which there is no release. In Tommo's own case, such a tattoo would signal his commitment to the society of the Taipi – and especially its leader, the "king" Mehevi, who feeds him – and thus a loss of self-determination (see Breitwieser 24). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it would bind him permanently to a non-European, "savage" culture.

The result of such an irreversible cultural defection is presented at the beginning of Melville's second book, *Omoo* (1847), in which the author fictionalizes his further South Sea adventures. *Omoo* opens with the protagonist's escape from Nuku Hiva on board an English whaler. When the ship approaches the Marquesas island of La Dominica (Hiva Oa), the narrator is confronted with a negative mirror image: an Englishman whose appearance demonstrates what happens to those beachcombers who acquiesce to having their faces tattooed.

> Soon after, the canoe came alongside. In it were eight or ten natives, comely, vivacious-looking youths, all gesture and exclamation; the red feathers in their head – bands perpetually nodding. With them also came a stranger, a renegado from Christendom and humanity – a white man, in the South Sea girdle, and tattooed in the face. A broad blue band stretched across his face from ear to ear, and on his forehead was the taper figure of a blue shark, nothing but fins from head to tail. Some of us gazed upon this man with a feeling akin to horror, no ways abated when informed that he had voluntarily submitted to this embellishment of his countenance. What an impress! Far worse than Cain's – *his* was perhaps a wrinkle, or a freckle, which some of our modern cosmetics might have effaced; but the blue shark was a mark indelible, which all the waters of Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, could never wash out. He was an Englishman, Lem Hardy he called himself, who had deserted from a trading brig touching at the island for wood and water some ten years previous. (Melville, *Omoo* 22-23)

As in other passages related to tattooing, Melville here uses ironic hyperbole. Despite the comic incongruity of its comparisons, however, the passage effectively drives home the point that tattooed defectors have signs of alterity written into their skin, and that they consequently become the object of discursive othering themselves. Melville leaves no doubt as to the status of tattoos as indelible bodily stigmas. As Joanna White notes:

> Clothing could be replaced, but tattoos were a permanent marker of beachcombers' residence in the Pacific islands. They were interpreted by other Europeans as physical symbols of their transgression from and rejection of the values of their native culture. The more visible and irreversible the transformation, the more problematic the individual's reincorporation into his own native society. (86)

White's general reference to "tattoos" is slightly misleading, however, since most nineteenth-century sailors who received tattoos in Polynesia never lived in island communities. Facial tattooing, by contrast, remained a form of body modification that was clearly limited to cultural defectors, even after the advent of the tattooing fashion in Europe and the United States. In *Typee*, Tommo at first absolutely refuses to be tattooed. When the Taipi continue to urge him, he offers them both his arms from the shoulder to the wrist (Melville, *Typee* 220). For the gentleman-beachcomber, tattoos on the extremities – features characteristic of the common sailor – would signify a social decline, but they could easily be hidden beneath his clothes. A tattooed face, on the other hand, would be clearly visible to everyone but himself and it would symbolize the transgression of a cultural boundary. Such a bodily mark, Melville's narrator-protagonist is convinced, would make a return to his native country impossible. As Tommo revealingly phrases it, he would "never more [...] have the *face* to return to [his] countrymen" (see above). Echoing the words of Gonzalo Guerrero, which were quoted at the outset of this paper, this exclamation illustrates the dangers involved in beachcombing: if it leads to a permanent, and conspicuous, modification of the body, cultural defection may be sanctioned by the colonial society, which is anxious to maintain visible difference between "civilization" and "savagery."

Having undergone irreversible change in the process of cultural encounter, the facially tattooed sailor carried home traces of a faraway culture, traces that remained perceptible on the surface of his body. In a culture obsessed with the visual, these enigmatic ornaments were read as marks of the inscrutable other. The case of Melville shows how great a fascination such a transgression possessed. A few years after the publication of *Omoo*, the author personified the ambivalent allure of Polynesian tattooing in the now famous figure of the checkered "cannibal" Queequeg. Even though Melville refused to have his own body tattooed, his South Sea narratives, from *Typee* to *Moby-Dick*, thus ensured that the Polynesian practice of tattooing left an indelible imprint on the body of Western travel writing. From there it continues to haunt the cultural imagination – as a potentially deceptive sign of alterity, a boundary marker that blurs rather than clarifies distinctions, indicating the possibilities of cross-cultural contact and exchange.

Works Cited

Anderson, Charles Roberts. *Melville in the South Seas*. 1939. 2nd ed. New York: Dover Publications, 1966.

Bitterli, Urs. *Die "Wilden" und die "Zivilisierten": Grundzüge einer Geistes- und Kulturgeschichte der europäisch-überseeischen Begegnung*. 1976. 2nd rev. ed. München: Beck, 1991.

Bougainville, Louis-Antoine de. *Voyage autour du monde par la frégate du Roi La Boudeuse et la flûte L'Étoile*. 1771. Ed. Jacques Proust. Paris: Gallimard, 1982.

Branch, Watson G. *Melville: The Critical Heritage*. London and Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.

Breitwieser, Mitchell. "False Sympathy in Melville's *Typee*." *Herman Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Myra Jehlen. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994. 15-26.

Bronwen, Douglas. "'Cureous Figures': European Voyagers and *Tatau*/Tattoo in Polynesia, 1595-1800." *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*. Ed. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 33-52.

Caplan, Jane, ed. *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000.

---. "Introduction." *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Ed. Jane Caplan. London: Reaktion Books, 2000. xi-xxiii.

Collingham, E.M. *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800-1947*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

Cook, James. *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery*. Vol. 1: *The Voyage of the Endeavour, 1768-1771*. Ed. J.C. Beaglehole. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Dening, Greg. "Introduction." *The Marquesan Journal of Edward Robarts, 1797-1824*. Ed. Greg Dening. Honolulu, HI: University Press of Hawaii, 1974. 1-29.

---. *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land. Marquesas 1774-1880*. Chicago, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1980.

Díaz del Castillo, Bernal. *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517-1521*. 1632. Trans. A. P. Maudslay. London: George Routledge & Sons, 1939.

Edmond, Rod. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Frank, Michael C. *Kulturelle Einflussangst: Inszenierungen der Grenze in der Reiseliteratur des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006.

Gell, Alfred. *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Gilbert, Steve. *Tattoo History: A Source Book*. New York: Juno Books, 2000.

Herbert, Jr., T. Walter. *Marquesan Encounters: Melville and the Meaning of Civilization*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Kabris, Joseph [alias Jean-Baptiste Cabri]. "Précis historique et véritable du séjour de J.H Kabris, natif de Bordeaux, dans les Îles de Mendoça, situées dans l'Océan Pacifique" [Excerpts]. Pierre and Marie-Noëlle Ottino-Garanger. *Te Patu Tiki: Le Tatouage aux Îles Marquises*. Paris: Jean-Pierre Pourcade & Ch. Gleizal Éditeur, 1998. 150.

Kohl, Karl-Heinz. "'Travestie der Lebensformen' oder 'kulturelle Konversion'? Zur Geschichte des kulturellen Überläufertums." *Abwehr und Verlangen: Zur Geschichte der Ethnologie*. Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1987. 7-38.

Landa, Friar Diego de. *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*. 1864. Trans. William Gates. New York: Dover, 1978.

Landfester, Ulrike. "Gestochen scharf: Die Tätowierung als Erinnerungsfigur." *Schmerz und Erinnerung*. Ed. Roland Bongards. Munich: Fink, 2005. 83-98.

Lombroso, Cesare. *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria: Atlante*. 5th ed. Turin: Bocca, 1897.

---. *Criminal Man*. Trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafer. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

Melville, Herman. *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. 1846. Ed. John Bryant. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.

---. *Omoo. Adventures in the South Seas*. 1847. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000.

Maude, H. E. *Of Islands and Men: Studies in Pacific History*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Mueller, Rose Anna. "Gonzalo Guerrero and the Discourse of Colonialism." *Colonizer and Colonized*. Ed. Theo D'haen and Patricia Krüs. Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000. 193-203.

Oettermann, Stephan. *Zeichen auf der Haut: Die Geschichte der Tätowierung in Europa*. 1979. 4th ed. Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1995.

Osterhammel, Jürgen. *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. 1995. Trans. Shelley L. Frisch. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997.

Ottino-Garanger, Pierre, and Marie-Noëlle Ottino-Garanger. *Te Patu Tiki: Le Tatouage aux Îles Marquises*. Paris: Jean-Pierre Pourcade & Ch. Gleizal Éditeur, 1998.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

Robarts, Edward. *The Marquesan Journal of Edward Robarts, 1797-1824*. Ed. Greg Dening. Honolulu, HI: University Press of Hawaii, 1974.

Romero, Rolando J. "Texts, Pre-Texts, Con-Texts: Gonzalo Guerrero in the Chronicles of Indies." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 26.3 (1992): 345-67.

Samson, John. *White Lies: Melville's Narratives of Facts*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Thomas, Nicholas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas, eds. *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

Thomas, Nicholas. "Introduction." *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*. Ed. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 7-29.

von den Steinen, Karl. *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst: Studien über die Entwicklung primitiver Südseeornamentik nach eigenen Reiseergebnissen und dem Material der Museen*. Vol. 1: *Tatauierung: Mit einer Geschichte der Inselgruppe und einer vergleichenden Einleitung über den polynesischen Brauch*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1925.

von Langsdorff, Georg H. *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World, during the Years 1803, 1804, 1805, 1806, and 1807*. 2 vols. 1813-14. Reprint. Amsterdam: N. Israel/New York: Da Capo Press, 1968.

White, Joanna. "Marks of Transgression: The Tattooing of Europeans in the Pacific Island." *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*. Ed. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 72-89.